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ABSTRACT

West Chester University (Pennsylvania) set up a project designed to meet the seemingly diverse yet very similar needs of teacher education students and inner city children. Prospective teachers must begin to value and effectively serve more diverse populations, and the relationship between campus and the real world needs to be strengthened. Children in an urban environment have a need to become aware of the wider world and the kinds of opportunities that are available to them. This project provided field experience in an inner city teaching and learning environment early in a professional teacher preparation program, and it provided elementary school students with direct experience in a higher education suburban institution early in their lives to help them begin to build self images in an environment other than the one they know. The needs, goals, preparation, experiences, evaluation, and implications for both prospective teachers and young children are outlined. Five letters written by inner city youngsters thanking the Dean of the College of Education for the experience of visiting campus are appended. (LL)

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Field Experience Goes Both Ways: Exchange of Visits by Suburban University Students and Urban Elementary Students

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Field Experience Goes Both Ways:
Exchange of Visits by Suburban University Students and Urban Elementary Students

The urban population is the fastest growing segment of our society and the documented graying of the teaching force in these areas necessitates a strong need for new teachers who are able to function effectively in such environments. In recognition of the needs of inner city children and the job market, university and college professors need to reassess the attitudes and professional skills now included in preservice education courses. Coursework and programs must help these preservice teachers begin to value and effectively serve more diverse populations and therefore the relationship between the campus and the "real world" must be strengthened.

Conversely, children in an urban environment have a need to become aware of the wider world and the kinds of opportunities that are available to them. If children are going to be able to break the cycle of poverty that so many of them live in, they must first be able to visualize a different kind of life.

The project we will describe was an attempt to meet the seemingly diverse yet very similar needs of education students and inner city children.

I. NEEDS

A. College Students

West Chester University, historically a teacher training institution being first a normal school and then a state college, is a state-supported university located in a suburban/rural county some 25 miles from Philadelphia. There has been a population explosion in the surrounding area, the university (12,000) and particularly in the School of Education (2,000). The education student population can be generally described as white, Catholic, blue-collar, first generation college students, although the size of the non-traditional student population is growing rapidly. Education majors have at least three field placements during their preparation and most of these placements have been in the school districts surrounding the university. These districts tend to be in white, upper-middle class communities that serve an increasingly dense corridor of high technological industries. Many of the schools in which our students have field placements have been designated schools of excellence by the Federal Department of Education.

The students who enroll in the School of Education tend to espouse upwardly mobile values and attitudes. The courses and fieldwork continue to foster these values since their teachers and the field sites used are similar in background to those experienced by the students. Urban schools, almost by definition, have pupils who come from very different backgrounds and cultures. Therefore, serving and valuing these diverse

pupils, not to mention providing effective teaching for them, was hampered by lack of actual preservice experience in settings where multiculturalism is the norm rather than the exception.

The students do not generally have a wide experience in the city of Philadelphia other than excursions into the city for shopping or cultural events. There are many neighborhoods that they have seen only on the nightly newscasts, usually connected with the typical stories of poverty and crime.

B. Elementary Students (Kids)

The Morton Elementary school serves Headstart through grade four in an extremely varied neighborhood. The homes here range from small individual bungalows, to row houses, to units in a large low-income housing project. The population is also quite diverse: 50% Caucasion and 50% minority, mainly African American and a growing number of newly arrived Asians such as Laotian, Vietnamese, Chinese as well as other groups. Most of the children are bused to school.

The children come from homes and neighborhoods where most of the people they see are poor. Therefore most of the people they see are focused on mere survival and not the tradition of higher education. The children needed to become familiar with environments geared toward learning and exploration of possibilities as opposed to environments where they only react to conditions set by others. Exposure to an academic culture would allow them to experience and hopefully value cultures different

from their own. The third purpose in the project to help these young children begin to build images of themselves in an environment other than the one they knew. Visualizing options is the first step to actualizing them.

II. Goals

A. Students

1. provide direct experience in an inner city teaching-learning environment with direct experience in the schools early in the professional preparation;

2. provide the student with experiences in order that the student may better assess teaching in the inner city as a career choice;

3. provide ongoing support of the student's urban experience through the coordination of a West Chester University faculty member and a faculty representative from the assigned schools;

4. have students, through the urban experience gain a realistic view of what may be expected as an elementary school teacher in an urban environment; and

5. participate in relevant activities in their assigned urban elementary schools.

B. Kids

1. provide direct experience in a higher education institution early in their lives;

2. provide the child with experiences in order that the child may better assess college as a possible life choice;

3. provide ongoing support of the child's academic experience through the coordination of West Chester University faculty and students and a familiar teacher from their own schools;

4. have children, through the academic experience, gain a realistic view of what may be expected as a college student and;

5. participate in relevant activities in a college environment.

III Preparation

A. Students

Students typically enroll in the required field course without prior knowledge of where they would be placed. During the first class students in the urban project learned that they were assigned to Morton School in Philadelphia.

During the typical orientation period of four weeks before beginning their on-site work, the students explored their perceptions of urban education along with readings about the urban teaching environment. Perceptions were 83% negative and reactions ranged from actually dropping the class to expressions of apprehension, fear, and excitement. Teachers from the school where they would be placed came to campus, on several occasions, to describe the school population and programs. The students

used this opportunity to ask many questions and begin to develop more familiarity and more comfort with the approaching field experience.

It was clearly explained that bus service would be provided from campus to the school. This turned out to be a very crucial point as the students were fearful of the city neighborhoods, and very reluctant about driving and parking their cars in the area where the school was located.

B. Kids

The children's orientation to the college campus began when the students began their field placement work in their classes. The children had the opportunity to meet and interact not only with the students but also the professors involved in the project. This initial introduction to higher education occurred in a setting where the children were comfortable. In preparation for the visit, the children's teachers and college students discussed what they would see and do at the university and especially the route they would take to get there. This was particularly valuable since many of the children had never been out of the city. The children explored their feelings about going to an unfamiliar environment in much the same way as the college students did earlier. Perceptions and reactions were more positive because the children did not have the pressures of having to succeed in an unfamiliar environment.

IV. Experiences

A. Students

The students' course requirements in the urban experience sections were the same as other sections of these courses held in more traditional sites. However, their choice of topics to complete their assignments were very different. Students became cognizant of the many different perceptions of the world that the pupils they interacted with brought to school, and their activities with the children began to reflect a broader view. One student developed a unit on grandparents since so many of the children in her class were being raised by grandparents. All students became very much aware of how limited their view of the urban environment had been.

During each of the courses, students were required to keep journals recording and reflecting on their experiences. Analysis of their entries indicate a change in attitude about teaching in an urban environment. At first, the entries focused on the deficiencies of the schools, the children, and the students' general unhappiness about their placement site. Gradually, the entries changed to reflect more professional curiosity about teaching methods in order to meet the educational needs of the children. The students began to focus on the same kinds of issues that the students in the more familiar environments had. At the same time, the students began to adapt course content to meet the demands of the setting in which they were to practice.

In short, they began to act as typical education students, though with a distinct difference. No longer were they content to rely on their own experiences to make decisions about what the children needed. They began to realize that the children they taught had different experiences; and if they were to be effective teachers, they had to understand what those experiences were. This need led the students to participate in school activities above and beyond course requirements. Some students began driving their own cars in order to spend more time at the schools, participating in field trips, visiting other classes and programs in the school.

B. Kids

Children arrived by bus at the university . They were met by university faculty, some of whom they had already met at Morton School, and by both familiar and unfamiliar students who were to act as guides to small groups. Half of the children were bused to the university's south campus, home of the physical education and health facilities. The other half of the group toured the library, and visited some classes, residence halls, and administrative offices on the north campus.

At noon the children and their college guides ate bag lunches on the university's quad where many college students gather. After lunch, the groups reversed their intinerary and continued to visit more campus sights until it was time for the buses to return to Philadelphia.

V. Evaluation

A. Students

Along with the evaluation of their assignments, the students were asked to reflect upon their urban experience. The purpose of the reflections was to determine if the students' attitudes toward teaching in an urban environment had changed; if they would consider another Practicum in an urban setting; and any comments they wanted to make concerning their experience. At this point the authors will let the students speak for themselves:

"I really connected with the children. They are no different from other children except that they may have had a harder life and may need a little more attention and affection."

"I enjoyed working in the city."

"I would like to expand my experiences as much as possible."

"I'm glad I had this experience in Philadelphia, even though it was a long ride. I never even knew how urban children were, except from what I heard. But I got to experience how the children aren't that bad, they can be loud and uncontrollable at times, but they are a good group of kids."

"I took this because I honestly felt my education was lacking. By lacking, I mean in diversity. In all my fields I've (only) come to know children of varying ages who have a same basic middle upper class background."

"I enjoy working in the inner city even though I thought I would not. The children were great."

Assessment of student attitudes as expressed in their logs toward working in an urban environment indicate a change from 83% negative to 100% positive in the class. While these findings may appear unrealistic they are certainly not due to chance. We have found that when students are exposed to diverse populations in a carefully prepared manner such as in the context of a structured course and provided a "safe" introduction to an urban environment through provision of transportation and supportive school personnel, they learn to serve and value pupils who come from backgrounds different than their own.

As participants in the courses began to describe their experiences to their peers the enrollment in the urban sections of these field courses increased dramatically. The University, recognizing the demand for these type of courses, has begun to institutionalize them by listing urban-sited sections in the course schedules. During the course of program reviews, the aim is to develop enough of urban site sections of field courses so that all teacher education students can be required to have at least one placement in an urban setting.

B. Kids

After the visit the children were invited to reflect on their experiences and write thank you notes to the university.

Their writing indicates that as a result of their visit, the children began to set goals that include higher education as a possibility and some even went so far as to plan strategies to meet those goals. Because some of the parents accompanied the children on the trip it is anticipated that the hope and expectation of a college education was discussed at home thus creating a supportive environment for the children's aspirations. One child was the second in her family to make the trip and her experiences confirmed that of her sister. Having family members share the same positive experience of college life may help those hopes stay alive. As with the college students, the authors feel that the children express the meaning of the day much more eloquently (See Appendix A).

VI. Implications

At West Chester University we have begun to educate our preservice teachers to serve the children of the future by not only giving them the tools for problem solving in the classroom but also by providing situations where they can learn to understand and value diversity in very real settings. We also have begun to serve the needs of the children by providing situations where they can learn to understand and value a future they may not have considered before.

By working in these ways with prospective teachers and children perhaps we begin to create a dream and the means to keep it from being deferred.

Appendix A

April 25, 1991
Norton School
Phila. Pa. 19142

Dear Board Riders,

Thank you for inviting us to West Chester University yesterday I hope to come to West Chester I like the guides you gave us to take us around the campus. Me and my friends really enjoyed the tour we had a nice man. Your campus is humongous. I want to see you. Even though I don't know you that will just keep seeing you & think that you nice. When I come back I won't feel scared I will know almost everyone. I really do thank you for your kindness. Hope too see you again. Me and my friend Tina had lots of fun we were partners.

Your friend

Brooke

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63rd and Elmwood Ave.
Phila., Penna. 19142
April 25, 1991

Dear Dear Hanes,

I thank you for showing us West Chester University. I had fun here. I learned what they do at a college and how big a coll ge is. I liked running around the racing track. When I saw the gymnasium I thought it was the whole school! I t when I saw the rooms I knew it was a gym bu ding. When I saw a classroom I noticed there weren't ma y people. The library was big too. I had fun going to We Chester University.

Sincerely,
Juan

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April 26, 1991
Morton School
Phila. Pa. 1914

Dear Dean Haines,

Thank you for inviting us to West Chester University. My Name is Curtis Davis, I'm 9 year old. I liked the tour and the tourist, Please tell Danielle Nye that I'll writing to her. I want to go to West Chester University when I grow up, I have some questions to ask you. Do They have a church at West Chester University? How old are you? I liked the trip, It was real fun. I loved it at West Chester University, by Dean Haines. I have to close the letter good bye. May God Bless you

yours Truly,
Curtis

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63rd and Elmwood Ave
Phila., Penna 19142
April 25, 1991

Dear Dean Hanes,

Thank you for showing us around your part of the school I would love to come to West Chester University. It seem like a nice school since I've been there that period of time. You seem like you are nice. Thank you for the card you sent back with Mr. Mack I am going to use that cup everyday and every night and when I drink out of it I will think of West Chester University I am not going to Temple or any other college I am going to West Chester University I like the dorms, library, classr the gym room and Everything

Your Visitor,
Stephanie

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63rd and Elmwood
Phila, Penna. 19142
April 25, 1991

Dear Dean Harley,

I had fun at West Chester Univer. I like the track and the swiming pool. I also liked the gym. The best part was when we went to the library and Keith showed us how to use a card catalog on a Computer.

Your Visitor,
Clarence

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